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Coming to an Admissions Process Near You...

Professor Arthur Burns



As Peter Mandler's presidential letter makes clear, we don't yet know the final outcome of the reform of History GCSE and A-Level. However, it may be helpful to highlight some features of the emerging landscape, since once announcements are made there will be a comparatively short period before the first student products of the new regime arrive at the doors of British universities. All readers involved in undergraduate admissions will be aware of elements of what follows, but the sheer speed of change means that many will be only partially up to speed on what is coming.

First, some good news. Although the balance of press coverage still tends to play to the 'Humanities in crisis?' agenda, History in the schools remains in good health thanks to high-quality teaching and the attractiveness of the subject. If anything it has profited from recent changes. History's place in the EBacc has driven a rise in numbers taking History GCSE (a phenomenon happily duplicated in language subjects). Featuring among the 'facilitating subjects' identified by the Russell Group as those most useful to students seeking an appropriate portfolio for admission has probably had a similar reinforcing effect at A-Level. From 2016 EBacc will take centre stage in new performance measures for schools - 'Performance 8' and 'Progress 8' - which should cement History's place among the core subjects delivered at GCSE. However, in the new system the key data for league tables will no longer relate to raw attainment, but to progress achieved by pupils since leaving primary school, making more schools - including those with 'good' exam results - vulnerable to falling short of their targets. In this context should one EBacc subject be generally judged to be more 'difficult' than another, there may be pressures within all schools to steer pupils towards 'easier' options which boost progress scores. It will therefore matter how the new History GCSE comes to be perceived in these terms.

Examination boards are currently developing new specifications to meet DfE and Ofqual requirements. As Peter notes, there is potentially much that will be welcome here, not least as it is intended to ensure that pupils are exposed to contrasting chronological frames and periods and a variety of approaches to history. Yet the devil will really lie in the detail. Particularly at GCSE, the new specifications must cram an awful lot into a few separate elements, each of which delivers two or more aspects of the requirements (such as 'sources' or 'depth'). Much depends on how the various demands are bundled. We can be confident that students will be exposed to a greater variety of history over their school career at least in terms of periods studied - but the question is how much greater? There will be a temptation for examination boards, commercial competitors as they are, to play safe by offering curricula as close as possible to current options to appeal to teachers struggling with change across all years from Key Stage 3 to A-Level. Those teachers may themselves never have taught or indeed studied much beyond the Tudors and twentieth-century history. Our discussions with examination boards, however, indicate that some curriculum developers are seizing the opportunity to try something new and exciting, and where this is the case, the RHS will lend them our support.

There are other things that we can already say will almost certainly change for the better. Exam boards are reviewing how to set questions about primary sources, and will emphasise the currently blurred distinction between these and secondary sources. Some may demand more extended responses exploring longer source extracts. Despite Ofqual's concerns about reliability and parity of assessment, longer pieces of writing requiring more subjective evaluation than multiple choice answers will remain central to assessment (though here a worry is the difficulty examination

boards currently experience in recruiting qualified senior examiners to lead such assessment). In addition, the DfE and Ofqual have refined assessment criteria following the publication of the first proposals in ways that will make them more fit for purpose with less emphasis on simple recall. Some serious causes for concern nevertheless remain. One is now what seems to be the almost certain removal of coursework from GCSE - though it might yet remain outside the formal qualification as what would surely be a largely unwelcome unassessed add-on. We regret this development while acknowledging the genuine concerns of the examination boards and government about the reliability of the associated assessment outcomes. This change may have other indirect consequences. The final public draft specification included a demand for study of the historic environment most readily accommodated within a personal study. With the study excised, the challenge will be to develop external assessment to examine study of the local historical environment other than through general generic questions encouraging teaching to the test.

At A-Level, the future of AS looks very uncertain as a stand-alone qualification not contributing to the A-level outcome. It is intended that it should be possible to teach the AS alongside the A-Level, but the demand that the assessment for A-Level must be clearly distinct in its level from that for AS will complicate attempts to prepare students for both assessments at the same time. Our discussions with teachers, especially those in Sixth-Form Colleges and schools which face an imminent and significant reduction in the unit of resource for sixth-form students, indicate that many are questioning whether to continue delivering AS; much will depend on HE sending clear messages on its value to applicants. For History in particular, its ability to recruit A2 students from those who have enjoyed AS History may mean such changes will impact on the numbers taking A-Level. Some teach-

ers also worry that male students will suffer from the loss of the formal hurdle (a.k.a. wake-up call) that makes AS a useful spur to success at A-Level. Admissions officers may well miss AS and its ability to indicate talent in a subject as they take decisions about applicants. But more generally, it is clear that for a number of years they are going to need to have their wits about them. They will be deciding between candidates who - depending on the year they commenced their studies - will have a portfolio of 'old' or 'new' GCSEs, A-Levels and ASs. Moreover at A-Level the gradual phasing in of the new qualifications will see individual students with a mixture of old and new; and even once the new system is in operation, candidates from Wales and Scotland will have different qualifications from those from England, adding a new complexity to a qualification menu which will also include the IB and international GCSEs. All in all it is clear that the next few years will be particularly demanding for everyone in schools, examination boards and universities as they all seek to get to grips with the workings of the system and to learn to interpret its outcomes. Colleagues in universities will also sympathise with the demands faced by schoolteachers confronted with a sudden need to acquire new subject knowledge in unfamiliar aspects of History (this will be particularly the case for those who have been teaching Modern World options). It is clear that the lines of communication between schools, examination boards, universities and indeed the DfE and Ofqual need to be functioning effectively. As soon as the dust settles, the RHS hopes to facilitate such conversations by organising an event bringing all interested parties together.

Arthur Burns